

Mendel Peterson

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COMMUNITY BRANCH STATION

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CONSULTANT IN MATTERS RELATING TO UNDERWATER EXPLORATION
IDENTIFICATION AND APPRAISAL OF:
MATERIALS RECOVERED FROM UNDERWATER SITES
TREASURE TROVE
COINS OF ALL PERIODS
LECTURES

October 2, 1973

Mr. Eric P. Newman
6450 Cecil Avenue
St. Louis, Missouri
63105

Dear Eric,

I am sending you by insured mail a pillar dollar, 1732 with the MF assayers mark. This is the one with the most encrustation of those I have. As I told you I accepted 3 1733 MX and 2 1732 dollars from Mr. Fisher in return for a debt to me for travel expenses, appraisal fees and a Roman gold ring Ca. 100 AD which I had traded him. He is into me for about 2500-3000. No matter what the final outcome of the matter I have lost. In any case it will be fun to investigate this to the end. I have written Mel I have withdrawn my first opinion the coins were genuine and will withhold any further opinion until we all can come to some definite conclusion.

The following external evidence applies:

1. I saw 116 coins in one lot which had encrustations which varied from the light encrustation on the specimen I am sending (naturally I picked the best I saw) to coins which appeared to have lost almost half of their silver, it having been converted to silver sulphide. I saw several clumps of coins stuck together and two I cleaned showed the impression of the design of their fellows very clearly. Some of the coins showed iron stains.
2. Other sites of the 1733 fleet have yielded specimens of the coinage but I did not have a clear specimen of these authentic pieces to compare to the Fisher coins.
3. Mr. Fisher stated that the coins came from a site outside Florida waters and showed me a letter purportedly applying to this site in which the state of Florida said they had no interest in the site since it was in international waters.

Several questions present themselves in this riddle:

1. Why would counterfeiters prepare such fine dies in the details of the insignia and then engrave the letters of such different style?
2. Why would they produce such a large number of coins since this would preclude any substantial price being maintained in a flooded market?
(please see next page)

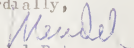
3. Can they indeed produce such a genuine looking encrustation in an electrolytic bath?
4. Are we to assume we know everything there is to know about the first milled issue of coins from the Mexico City Mint?
5. Have we really seen enough of the undoubtedly genuine pieces to state without doubt that this style of lettering is false?
6. How can one believe the Spanish, who were very intelligent people, would establish a mint at great expense, equipped with the latest in machines and expect to furnish all the punches, hubs etc from Spain?
7. The communication time between Spain and Mexico was 3 months to a year for a round trip. Would not the Spanish have furnished an engraver to the mint and not taken the chance of a crippling accident which might have closed down operations because of a high rate of broken dies or punches?

The coins are of the correct weight and slightly larger in diameter than the later pillar dollars which could account for the shallow striking which they display. The big question is the style of the lettering with the little notch at the base and tops. I have seen this exact style on early silver plates from the Mexico City mint recovered from a ship of the 1553-4 fleet which wrecked on the Texas coast but nowhere else. The vertical lines on the edge seem to indicate the coins were struck in a collar, a technique known in Europe many years before. Later dollars show no vertical lines I can see and must have been edged with the type of machine shown in Diderot's plates on minting. Are we so knowledgeable about the machines and operations of the first years of operation of the mechanized Mexico City mint we can say without doubt they did not use a collar at anytime?

Next month I will be in Florida again and will get to see an undoubted specimen of the 1733MX recovered from the wreck of the St. Joseph of the 1733 fleet. I will take one of mine and compare the lettering under a good glass to see if I can learn anything. Meanwhile you have the specimen I send to play with. I want it back eventually of course and if we finally conclude the pieces are false will deposit them in the reference collections of the Smithsonian and Hoskin's office.

You will be amused by the latest scuttlebutt about the source of these pieces. A friend of mine in Florida is quoting a commercial pilot who flies to Tokyo as having seen these coins on sale there at bargain prices and that that they are being made there. Of course, the pilot probably doesn't know one pillar dollar from another and may be seeing genuine pieces from the Chinese trade. I told you of the other rumor—a great lot of these was discovered off Cadiz being salvaged treasure from the 1733 Fleet which was lost when the salvage ship sank upon reaching Spain.

Meanwhile, back in the fudge factory, we will try to duplicate the encrustation on some silver coins by reversing the cleaning process. Best wishes, and please pardon my stuttering typewriter, like my heart, it skips a beat now and then.

Cordially,

 Mendel Peterson

Copy to: Mr. Hoskins
 Randolph Zander

October 3, 1973

Mr. Melvin Fisher
Treasure Salvors
Margaret Street
Key West, Florida

Dear Mel,

So many questions have been raised about the 1732 and 1733 pillar dollars by people who are expert in the field I am now convinced much further study is needed before a final conclusion can be made. The pieces might very well be false and I completely wrong in giving the opinion to you that they are genuine. I have not yet had an unquestioned original of the years 1732 and 1733 to compare with the specimens I got from you but the plates I have show a variation in the lettering which is disturbing. I agree that the people expressing opinions have been going only on the evidence of the coins and are not familiar with the numbers found or their physical condition, there are other pieces of external evidence which should be discussed and the question is far from simple. I am doing a further study of the pieces and also will try to set up a bath to artificially age other silver pieces. Meanwhile I must withdraw my opinion of the genuineness of the pieces until we complete our studies and experiments. Please do not quote me further on this. It also appears now that my first opinion of the gold bars was correct. I was able to convince myself they could be genuine and part of a Royal remittance not requiring individual assaying. Now I believe they are false. We are running further analyses on samples and this may show something.

I am sorry for my apparent vacillations on the subject but the questions are complex and I was hasty.

Sincerely,
1475

Mendel Peterson

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10/3/73

Dear Eric,

I left out one of the primary facts about the lot of pillar dollars when I wrote you yesterday.

The lot I saw 116 pieces broke down about as follows:

1732 F -----50 pieces 1732 MF -----4 or 5 pieces

1733 MX MF -----50 pieces 1733 MX F -----6 or so pieces.

Why would counterfeiters go to the pains of producing these varieties? How would they know of the 1732 MF variety which isn't even mentioned in most references?

Of course it could be pointed out that the 1733 MX should not appear with the F mark if the 1732 appeared with the MF mark. The answer to this could very well be that near the end of the coinage of the 1732 the second assayer Manuel de la Pena joined Francisco de la Pena Flores and his initial was added to one or two dies. Then when the coinage for 1733 with the apparently short-lived MX mark was struck early in the year a reverse die with only F on it was combined with the 1733 MX obverse until the error was discovered or the die broke giving us the rare 1733 pieces with the F mark only.

Best wishes,

Mendel
Mendel Peterson